12/18/11 Opening Remarks

Contrary to conventional wisdom, a time of transition, when a pastor who has been in place for a long time leaves, can be a time of high energy and creativity in the life of a congregation.

On January 29, 2012, a new chapter will begin in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church, a transition between my retirement and the selection and arrival of a new pastor. And my fondest hope is that will be a good and lively time around here. I hope that you will continue to support generously this church and its mission and ministry, that you will contribute regularly, fulfill pledges, and if you have not yet done so, that you will make a financial pledge for 2012 before the end of the year. Better yet – this morning.

And I hope you will invest a little something extra of yourself in the life of this church next year.

The staff has come up with an excellent and interesting idea: Reading Through the Bible in a Year. You are invited to do that: something you probably have thought about but never gotten around to – reading straight through the Bible. Many have begun the journey and have become mired down, halted somewhere in the middle of Leviticus – when the Mosaic law starts to deal with dietary laws and why it isn't a good idea to eat a camel or a rock badger, or shrimp or King Crab legs dripping with butter.

So the proposal is to read and study together and the staff has agreed to help twice a week. On Tuesday evening from 6 to 7 and Thursday morning from 10 to 11 there will be a discussion of that week's readings – two chapters of Old Testament and one chapter of New Testament each day – facilitated by a staff person.

The program will begin on Tuesday, January 3rd, 6 pm in the 737 building, multipurpose room and Thursday, January 5th at 10 am in the Calvin Room of 737.

Ministers this morning have more written information – so I invite you to ask anyone with a collar on – except me – I'm retiring.

One of the exciting and creative things that will go on around here next year is the steady completions of the Gratz Center, the five story building behind and connected to this 1914 structure.

The last steel beams, some of them 20,000 pounds, will be put in place by a huge crane and welded in the next week – it is quite a thrilling sight. You can actually begin to see the spaces – the dining room, classrooms and chapel.

This morning there is one of the steel beams – a smaller one – in Anderson Hall for you to sign before it is installed at the very top of the structure. I signed it on Friday and so did Calum with a Scottish flag, so take a moment after worship and add your name to this exciting new chapter in the life of Fourth Presbyterian Church.

An important event in the life of our nation happened, fairly quietly, last week. The war in Iraq came to an end. The American flag was furled, and the last of our troops prepared to come home.

4,483 American service personnel died in this war – more than 30,000 were wounded.

Estimates vary, but at least 100,000 Iraqi's, most of them civilians, men, women and children also died.

Regardless of your opinions, feelings and convictions about the Iraq War – and there is a great diversity here. Some strongly disagreed with the decision to invade Iraq, eight years ago. Some supported the decision. Some wished for even more troops to be committed. Some are now suggesting that we ought to start another, inevitably larger, more horrific war in the region.

Regardless, it is appropriate this morning to thank God for the selfless devotion of all those who served and sacrificed so much: to pray for the 4,483 American families who lost a loved one and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families who also lost one or more of their own. And to pray for our leaders, military and political, who will continue to make critical decisions about Afghanistan.

And to pray for peace in the world, particularly in the Middle East, which remains very fragile and dangerous.

So, let us pray…

Lord of all people and all nations, Lord of human history, we thank you for the courage and devotion of the men and women of our armed forces. We add our gratitude to that of their loved ones as they come home. We pray for all those who will continue to grieve the loss of a precious loved one. We pray for the Iraqi people and their leaders, particularly for those who grieve and we pray for the peace the angels promised and good will among all. Now startle us, once again – with a bright star in the night, and a sky full of angels, and a humble birth, the birth of your son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.